

ALEXANDER MACKAY: ROAD-MAKER FOR CHRIST IN UGANDA

November 3, 2004 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

The following is an abbreviated edition of "Alexander Mackay: Road-Maker for Christ in Uganda," from *Blazing the Missionary Trail* by Eugene Harrison, Scripture Press, c. 1949:

Alexander Mackay (1849-1890) was born in Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, October 13, 1849. He was a bright, earnest lad and early surrendered his heart to Christ. His father and mother agreed in hoping that he would become a minister or a missionary. He loved the long winter evenings when, the father being away preaching, the mother told exciting stories of Carey and Martyn, Moffat and Livingstone.

Very early the lad began to show unusual interest in mechanics. When a small boy he often went among the masons as they were building the Free Church of Rhynie, and it was considered prophetic of his future career that, when they jocularly asked him, "Well, laddie, gaen to gie us a sermon the day?" He would reply, "Give me a trowel, so can preach and build same time."

The villagers were one day startled to see Mr. Mackay, the minister of the Free Church, and his thirteen-year-old son gazing down at the road, while the father drew marks in the dirt with his walking stick.

"Fat's the minister glowerin' at, wi' his loon Alec, in the dust o' the turnpike?" the villagers inquired of one another.

If they had been near enough, they would have heard the father saying: "You see, Alec, this is the Zambesi River, and here, running into it from the north is the Shire. Here is where Livingstone was surrounded by infuriated savages. There he met a slave caravan of eighty-four men, women and children and managed to free them."

That was all very thrilling to young Alec, but the next day he walked four miles to the nearest railway station, watched the train come to a stop, followed every movement as the engineer used his long-nosed oil-can and felt the bearings with his hands to see if they were hot; then Alec trudged homeward as soon as the train had departed. When he got back to Rhynie he had walked eight miles in order to look at a railway engine for two and one half minutes! He liked to linger around the blacksmith's shop and the carding-mill, and spent considerable time in the attic at his little printing press.

A MISSIONARY CALL BY THE WAY OF A DEAD FRENCHMAN

Thirteen years went by, during which he completed a two year's teaching course, learned much about ship-building in the docks of Aberdeen, made a thorough study of engineering, and went to Germany for further study. He had read avidly all he could find about his hero, David Livingstone, and on the anniversary of that great man's death had written in his diary: "Livingstone died -- a Scotsman and a Christian -- loving God and his neighbor, in the heart of Africa. 'Go thou and do likewise.'"

But how could he ever go to Africa? What could an engineer do there? As he was pondering these questions in Berlin on the night of December 12, 1875, he picked up a copy of the *Edinburgh Daily Review* which home-folks had sent him and read a letter that sent a mighty thrill through his being. Because of its author, the place of its composition, the story of its transmission, its contents and its consequences, this was one of the most remarkable letters ever penned. It was written by the daring explorer, Henry M. Stanley, in Ulagalla, Uganda, April 12, 1875, at the request of King M'tesa. More than seven months transpired before it appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* of London and then in other papers. When one thinks of its history in transit, the wonder is that it ever reached England at all.

It is the story of a pair of boots, owned and worn by a Frenchman, Colonel Linant de Ballefonds, to whom Stanley entrusted the letter. Marching northward from Uganda, the Frenchman and his caravan were proceeding along the bank of the River Nile, when they were suddenly attacked near Gondokoro by a band of savage tribesmen. Having killed the Frenchman, they heartlessly left his body lying unburied on the sand, where it was later discovered by some English soldiers who happened to pass that way. Before burying the Frenchman, they pulled off his long knee boots and in one of them found Stanley's letter, stained with the dead man's blood. They forwarded it to the English General in Egypt, who sent it on to the newspaper office in London.

This was the letter which attracted Mackay's attention that cold December night in 1875. In part it read as follows:

"King M'tesa of Uganda has been asking me about the white man's God ... Oh that some practical missionary would come here! M'tesa would welcome such. It is the practical Christian who can cure their diseases, build dwellings and turn his hand to anything -- this is the man who is wanted. Such a one, if he can be found, would become the saviour of Africa."

How marvelous, thought Mackay, that the king of Uganda desires a missionary and wants one who can "turn his hand to anything!" Being just that sort of person, both by interest and training, and having long cherished a desire to follow in the footsteps of Livingstone and Stanley, this was for him a call from on high. Immediately he wrote to the Church

Missionary Society: "My heart burns for the deliverance of Africa, and if you can send me to any of those regions which Livingstone and Stanley have found to be groaning under the curse of the slave-hunter, I shall be very glad."

Within four months Mackay, along with seven other young missionary volunteers, was on a ship bound for Zanzibar and Uganda, saying: "I go to prepare the way by which others more readily can go and stay and work."

After securing large supplies of necessary equipment, the missionaries set out from Zanzibar on an overland journey of eight hundred miles to the south end of Lake Victoria. Mackay was smitten down with a severe attack of fever and returned to the coast, while the others went ahead to the Lake and put together the Daisy, the boat in which they planned to sail across to Uganda.

Having recovered, Mackay undertook to build a wagon road from the coast to Mpwapwa, two hundred and thirty miles inland, and finally succeeded, despite manifold difficulties.

The jungle through which the missionary had cut his road was symbolic of the dark and perilous jungle of heathen superstitions in which he found himself after travelling eight hundred miles overland and crossing Lake Victoria, which was larger in area than his native Scotland and famed as the source of the Nile River. The people lived in abject fear of the sorcerers and sought by means of offerings and charms to ward off the evils which constantly threatened to engulf them. Every person wore charms on his body and every house had charms hung on the door. Every calamity -- such as famine, earthquake, war, plague, smallpox -- had its particular god, who must be propitiated by methods prescribed by the sorcerers or charmers. A Waganda would usually wear a number of charms: one to ward off disease, another to cure snake bite, another to prevent being hit by lightning, and others for similar purposes.

Mackay sought to teach the Waganda from God's word the evil of practicing or trusting in witchcraft. He also sought to give practical demonstrations on the impotence of their charms. One day he bought a very potent charm and said to a crowd of people: "Since I bought this charm, it is mine and I can do with it as I please, can't I?"

"Yes, indeed," they answered.

"Will it burn?" he asked.

"Oh, no. But you better not try it. The god will be very angry."

By means of a small lens and some wood, Mackay soon had a blazing fire. "Now let us see if there is magic power in this thing," he remarked, putting the charm into the fire. It

was soon reduced to ashes, whereupon half the crowd ran away in terror, while the rest remained, expecting every moment to see some terrible judgment fall on him.

Realizing that the Waganda were suffering fearful fevers caused by drinking the infected waters of the marsh, Mackay announced that he was going to dig a well on the hillside not far from his house. The natives thought that the clever white man had suddenly lost his mind. "Water comes from the sky, not from the ground," they said. As the hole went deep into the earth, one man had a flash of inspiration and exclaimed: "White man's country is on the other side of the world. He is digging a tunnel through the earth so he can make quick trips to his home country." All the people readily accepted this as the true explanation. Several days later, he struck water. "Mackay is a great wizard," the people cried. "The king must come to see this." When King M'tesa arrived in state, his eyes rolled in astonishment at the sight of the marvelous well.

Mackay had brought out with him the printing outfit he had used as a boy. He printed some large letters on sheets of paper and began to teach a group of eager people to read and write Suahili. He also spent considerable time translating and printing portions of the New Testament. These he used in his school and distributed to earnest inquirers.

FIRST CONVERTS BUT GREAT OBSTACLES

One day a slave brought to the missionary a letter which he had written with a pointed piece of spear-grass for a pen and ink made of soot mixed with banana juice. This was the message: "Bwana Mackay, Sembera has come with compliments and to give you great news. Will you baptize him, because he believes the words of Jesus Christ?"

This was "great news" indeed for the missionary, for Sembera was his first convert. Others soon followed in open confession of Christ, among them being three of the king's pages, named Mukasa, Kakumba and Lugalama. Mukasa changed his name to Samweli (Samuel) and Kakumba took the name of Yusufu (Joseph). For a time the missionary had high hopes of winning even the king, who listened attentively to his messages each Sunday and even requested baptism.

But these lofty hopes were rudely shattered. The missionary road-maker had great boulders in his path. Fierce opposition began to emerge, due in part to the presence of an influential party of Mohammedan traders, who hated all non-Moslems and Mackay in particular, for he lost no opportunity to condemn their traffic in slaves. The difficulty of the situation was enhanced by the arrival of a company of Frenchmen who, with all of heathen Africa waiting to be Christianized, deliberately undertook to subvert Mackay's Mission. They openly denounced Mackay, called his religion a pack of lies, and joined with the Mohammedans in spreading malicious reports concerning him. Moreover, they sought to win the king by guile, by flattery, and by keeping quiet concerning his many vices, whereas Mackay told M'tesa plainly of his crimes and refused to baptize him

unless he would give up polygamy, witchcraft, slave trading, plundering adjacent tribes, and other abominable cruelties. Thus the king was turned against Mackay, for he loved his heathen customs and gloried in his 300 wives. Henceforth he preferred the smooth, diplomatic message of the Frenchmen, rather than the uncompromising gospel of a second John the Baptist.

Mackay writes in his diary: "February 1, 1881. Meantime, every crime and form of uncleanness is rampant in the country. Each day reveals fresh tales of iniquity, cruelty and oppression. One army has been sent east to murder and plunder, while another army has been sent west for the same purpose. Not even the natives can call it war; they all say it is for robbery and devastation."

Again he writes: "This is the fifth time in the course of two years that a great army has been sent by M'tesa into Busoga, not to war, but avowedly to devastate and murder, and bring back the spoil -- women, children, cattle and goats. The most heart-rending of Livingstone's narratives of the slave-hunters by Arabs and Portuguese on the Nyassa and Tanganyika shores, dwindle into insignificance compared with the organized and unceasing slave-hunts carried on by the king of Uganda. We are sorely down cast. The king seems daily to become more hopelessly sunk in every form of vice and villainy. But is any case too hard for the Lord?"

Sometimes victims were saved up for several weeks for a kiwendo; that is, a great slaughter of human beings for the purpose of securing a blessing either for the living king or a departed king. Mackay writes in his diary: "February 6, 1881. Two years ago the king gave orders for a kiwendo and two thousand innocent people were slaughtered in one day. Less than a year ago a similar atrocity was committed. Two thousand poor peasants were caught, fastened in forked sticks, kept in pens and murdered on the set day, as an expiatory offering to the departed spirit of the former king, Suma. Now another kiwendo is about to take place, because the king is ill and a sorcerer has told him that only a great slaughter can heal his sickness."

Risking his life, Mackay wrote the king a letter, pleading that he spare the lives of these innocent people, but his plea was scornfully disregarded.

THE NEW KING BURNS THE NATIVE CONVERTS

All Uganda was in breathless suspense one day. Throughout the land went the cry, "King M'tesa is dead." Who would be chosen by the chiefs as his successor? At length a great cheer went up from the palace. "M'wanga has eaten Uganda!" the populace shouted.

The new king, M'wanga, had all the barbaric vices of his father, King M'tesa, and others besides. A vain and vicious lad of eighteen, he despised the Christian followers of Mackay and longed to display his power. When his palace burned down one day, this

modern Nero put the blame on the Christians and began to persecute them, as did that other Nero when Rome burned. Three Christian boys were caught by order of the king. They were Seruwanga, Yusufu, and Lugalama, the oldest fifteen, the youngest twelve. A mob soon gathered and helped to build a fire. Armed with great curved knives, the executioners arrived.

This is a scene of heroism which should be placed alongside the noblest instances of martyrdom in the annals of the Christian Church. The head executioner was Mujasi, a Mohammedan. "Do you admit being followers of Jesus Christ?" asked Mujasi fiercely. The two younger boys nodded assent, but Seruwanga's boldly answered, "Yes, and I am not ashamed of it." "You believe you will rise from the dead!" shouted Mujasi. "I shall burn you and see if this is so!" A hideous roar of laughter came from the mob. As Seruwanga's arms were cut off and his bleeding body was cast into the fire, no sound came from his lips, save words of testimony and of prayer. Yusufu was next mutilated and consigned to the flames.

Then took place the saddest scene of all. As the executioner approached the twelve-year-old Lugalama, the boy cried out: "Please do not cut off my arms. I will not struggle! Only throw me into the fire!" Surely this is one of the saddest prayers ever uttered on this sad earth -- "Only throw me into the fire!" The butchers did their ghastly work and the bleeding, tortured boy was committed to the flames...

The Mohammedans gloried in this bloody business but could not be content while the hated missionary remained untouched. Hearing of dire plots against his life, Mackay went to his Bible and to his knees for consolation and strength. The passage he read was Isaiah 51. "With such a promise," he says, "and such a refuge, and such a God, who shall be afraid?"

With such a promise! "I, even I, am He that comforteth you."

With such a refuge! "I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand."

With such a God! "I, even I, am ... the LORD thy maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth."

One day the king ordered Apolo Kagwa to commit an unmentionable abomination. When he refused, the King flew into a rage, beat him with a stick, knocked him down and abused him cruelly. The bloody passions of his nature were aroused and he cried: "Seize and burn all the Christians!" His executioners immediately went forth and seized scores of men and boys. These were tortured with all the ingenuity of barbarism. Finally all had their arms cut off and were burned to death in a slow fire. During this terrible persecution about two hundred Christians were tortured and burned. The head executioner said to King M'wanga that he had never before killed people who showed such bravery and

calmness in the face of death, as did the Christians. "Even in the fire," he said, "they prayed aloud to God."

A VISIT FROM HENRY STANLEY

While down on the shore of Victoria Lake engaged in building a steam launch for his missionary work, Mackay was signally cheered by a visit from Henry M. Stanley, whose letter in the *Edinburgh Daily Review* fourteen years earlier had thrilled his soul into action as a volunteer to answer the call of King M'tesa. The two men had many things of mutual interest to discuss, particularly Stanley's famous visit with Livingstone eighteen years earlier and Stanley's remarkable journey of 999 days across the continent and down the entire length of the mighty Congo. But the chief topic of conversation was Uganda and King M'tesa. Stanley was eager to know of the progress of the Mission but Mackay wanted first to hear further details of what took place when Stanley made his visit to King M'tesa fifteen years earlier, resulting in the famous letter urging missionaries to go to Uganda. This is the gist of Stanley's amazing recital.

When he reached the capital of Uganda, a great ovation and many surprises awaited him. To the accompaniment of noisy salutes from numerous guns, the waving of flags, the beating of drums and the sound of trumpets, he was conducted to the royal palace and welcomed by M'tesa, the most powerful king in Africa, ruling over about four million people, in contrast with most African kings who ruled over a few hundred or a few thousand.

For several months Stanley went almost daily to the palace for a baraza and discussed many subjects in response to questions put to him. One day he was asked to tell of the white man's God. As he told of the Father God who, of His great love, sent His Son to earth to teach, to heal and to die for sinful men, he noticed that the king and his chiefs were listening with an interest surpassing even that they had shown in the wonderful things he had told them of his explorations or about the marvels of civilized nations. On subsequent occasions he was frequently asked to tell more about the white man's religion.

Just before Stanley departed, the king called him to a special baraza of chiefs and officers, and addressed the court as follows: "As you well know, when the Mohammedans came I gave up the religion of our fathers and took that which was better. Now a white man, Stanley, has come with a book much older than the Koran and tells us of Jesus, the Son of God. Shall we believe in Jesus or in Mohammed?"

"Let us take that which is best," answered one of the chiefs. "But how can we know which is best and which is true?" asked the katikiro, or prime minister.

"Listen to me," said the king, "and I will answer the katikiro's question. The Arabs and the white men behave exactly as they are taught in their books, do they not? The Arabs

come here for ivory and slaves; as we all know they do not always speak the truth, and they buy slaves, putting them in chains, beating them and taking them far away to sell. But when white men are offered slaves, they say: 'Shall we make our brothers slaves? No. We are all sons of God.' When the explorers Speke and Grant came here, they behaved well. Indeed I have not heard a white man tell a lie yet. I say that the white men are greatly superior to the Arabs and I think, therefore, that their book must be a better book than Mohammed's. Now I ask you, which shall we accept?"

Seeing clearly what the king wanted, they all replied, "We will take the white man's book."

M'tesa begged that white men be sent to teach him and his people the good way. "Stanley," he said, "say to the white people when you write them, that I am like a man sitting in darkness, or born blind, and that all I ask is that I may be taught how to see."

Having told this story of his experiences at the court of King M'tesa fifteen years before, Stanley said: "Now, Mackay, tell me just what happened when you finally reached Uganda in response to my letter telling of M'tesa's plea for missionaries."

The great explorer was much saddened by Mackay's account of the way M'tesa had gone back to heathen cruelties and of the still more barbarous acts of King M'wanga. "You are worn out and need a change and a long rest," said Stanley. "Come with me to the coast and to England." But the invitation was declined, due to the lack of missionary reinforcements. So Stanley departed. Later he said: "God knows if ever man had reason to be lonely and sad, Mackay had, when, after murdering his Bishop, and burning his pupils, and strangling his converts, and clubbing to death his dark friends, M'wanga turned his eye of death on him. And yet the little man met it with calm blue eyes that never winked. It is worth going a long journey to see one man of this kind, working day after day without a syllable of complaint or a moan, and to hear him lead his little flock in singing and prayer to show forth God's kindness in the morning and His faithfulness every night."

Just a few months after Stanley's visit, Mackay did lay down his tools and take a rest.

MACKAY'S FINAL DAYS

Worn out under the terrific strain of the days of persecution, Mackay was attacked by the African giant Mukunguru, or tropical fever. After lingering for a few days, he died February 8, 1890, at the early age of forty-one. "Being dead, he yet speaketh." And the Church today needs desperately to hear the voice of this hero of the Cross sounding across the years: "The continental idea of 'every man a soldier' is the true watch word for Christian missions. The conversion of the heathen must become the work of the Church

and not merely a small branch of its work. If Christianity is worth anything, it is worth everything."

THE COST OF MAKING A ROAD FOR GOD

When the offices of the Church Missionary Society held a farewell service April 25, 1876, for the eight missionaries going out to Uganda, Mackay reminded them that quite probably one of the eight would fall within six months and others later. "But," he added, "when such news comes, do not be cast down but send others immediately to take the vacant places."

Those were prophetic words, for in less than two years he wrote home to say that of the eight, two had died of tropical disease, two had been murdered by the natives, and two had returned to England in broken health.

A number of recruits subsequently came out to fill the vacant places. Two of these died on the way, several returned in broken health, and Bishop Hannington was murdered. A little later Bishop Parker died on his way to the field.

A glimpse of what it cost Mackay is indicated by his words: "I am almost entirely broken down with fatigue and anxiety and want of sleep. What sadness and melancholy come over me at times, and I find myself shedding tears like a child! Still I plod on, teaching, translating, printing, doctoring and carpentering. Praise God! St. Matthew's Gospel is now published complete in Luganda and rapidly being distributed."

Alexander Mackay might have made much money and doubtless lived a much longer life, if he had given up his missionary career to accept a proffered post as an engineer of the British East Africa Company or a high position in the army of General Gordon in Egypt. He declined both offers and labored on at the task to which Christ had called him. When friends at home and the officers of the Church Missionary Society urged him to take a furlough, he wrote: "What is this you write -- 'Come home?' Surely now, in our terrible dearth of workers, it is not the time for anyone to desert his post. Send out only our first twenty men and I may be tempted to come to help you to find the second twenty."

If any today are prone to hesitate to answer the missionary summons, let them read the last messages of Alexander Mackay. After Bishop Parker's death many voices were raised in England against the policy of the Church Missionary Society in continuing to send workers to the Nyanza Mission. The fact that so many had died, the insolence and tyranny of the native king, and the bitter antagonism of the slave-dealers, were to many indications that it was the will of God that the mission should be abandoned.

The suggestion came to Mackay at a time when he was quite alone, and when the memory of the death of Bishop Parker was vivid in his mind. His answer, written in the

earnestness of a man who as a final argument was about to lay down his life, is as follows: "Are you joking? If you tell me in earnest that such a suggestion has been made, I can only answer, Never. Tell me, ye faint hearts, to whom ye mean to give up the mission. Is it to murderous raiders like M'wanga, or to slave-traders from Zanzibar, or to English and Belgian dealers in rifles and gunpowder, or to German spirit sellers? All are in the field, and they make no talk of giving up their respective missions."

A little later, to the faint-hearted, Mackay sent another message: "Please do not reply to my statement of our requirements as to men and a bishop with the word impossible. That word is unknown in the vocabulary of engineers. Surely, then, if those who build only temporary structures, because their materials are perishable, have expurgated the word from their vocabulary, how can it at all remain in the vocabulary of those who are engaged in building the Church of God and laying the foundation of that kingdom which shall endure forever?" No wonder Stanley called this man "the finest missionary since Livingstone."

After a life of great hardship; after having slept many times "in all sorts of places," he says --"a cow-shed, a sheepcote, a straw hut not larger than a dog-kennel, a hen-house and often in no house at all;" after distressing attacks of fever and diarrhea; after being almost poisoned on one occasion and narrowly escaping death from the fangs of a huge serpent on another; after being so hungry he had to "drive the wolf from the door," he says, "by taking the glass off lanterns, silvering them and selling them to the natives as mirrors, so as to buy food;" after seeing his converts tortured and burned or driven into hiding; after these and other ordeals, he died homeless on the shore of Lake Victoria when still a young man.

Was it worth while? Was it worth the cost?

Writing in 1922, Basil Matthews says: "Today the Prime Minister of Uganda is Apolo Kagwa, who as a boy was kicked and beaten by King M'wanga for being a Christian; and the King of Uganda, Kaudi, M'wanga's son, is a Christian. At the capital there stands a beautiful church. On the place where the boys were burned to death there stands a cross, put there by seventy thousand Waganda Christians in memory of the young martyrs."

Was it worth the cost?

Slave-raiding and slave-trading have been abolished; innocent people are no longer butchered to appease the gods; and the torture and burning of human beings to satisfy a mad king's lust for blood has ceased forever in Uganda. Mackay did not live to see these marvelous triumphs but with the eye of faith he asserted: "The conquest of Africa has already cost many lives; but the end to be gained is worth the price paid. Let us not forget that the redemption of the world cost infinitely more."

Alexander Mackay was the one who built the road, saying: "This will certainly yet be a highway for the King Himself; and all that pass this way will come to know His name."

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